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*Speaking in Tongues:
Celebrating Walt Whitman
in Translation*

Poetry in Times of Struggle: Walt Whitman and Young Bosnia

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ABSTRACT. *The paper examines the pre-World War I reception of Walt Whitman's poetry in the Serbo-Croatian linguistic and cultural space, focusing on the interest shown in the American poet by the members of the Young Bosnia circle between 1908 and 1913. Young Bosnia was a loosely connected group of young intellectuals and high-school students who shared ideas of national liberation and South Slavic unification, introducing revolutionary tendencies to the domain of literature, as well, voicing requests for the modernization of literary expression. Whitman was among the foreign authors that this group found particularly inspiring, and the translations of his poems which the Young Bosnians published were vital for promoting this poet's work among the Yugoslav intelligentsia and are significant in the overall Serbo-Croatian reception. The paper aims to point to the importance of these translations in the wider cultural context of the time, when the Young Bosnians were actively involved in the struggle for national independence and cultural progress of the South Slavs.*

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article étudie la réception de la poésie de Walt Whitman dans l'espace linguistique serbo-croate avant la Première Guerre mondiale. Il se concentre tout particulièrement sur l'intérêt manifesté par les membres du groupe Jeune Bosnie entre 1908 et 1913. Ce groupe était formé de jeunes intellectuels et de lycéens qui propagèrent leurs idéaux de libération nationale et d'unification des pays slaves méridionaux à travers la littérature tout en se faisant les apôtres de la modernisation de cette dernière. Whitman figurait en bonne place parmi les auteurs étrangers dont les Jeunes Bosniaques revendiquaient l'influence, et les traductions qu'ils publièrent jouèrent un rôle vital dans la promotion de cette poésie parmi l'intelligentsia yougoslave et jouent un rôle significatif dans la réception serbo-croate. Cet article espère souligner l'importance de ces traductions dans le contexte culturel général de l'époque, au moment où les Jeunes Bosniaques étaient activement engagés dans la lutte pour l'indépendance nationale et le progrès culturel des Sud-Slaves.

MOTS CLÉS : traduction, Walt Whitman, Jeune Bosnie, Mlada Bosna, Dimitrije Mitrinović

KEYWORDS: *translation, Walt Whitman, Young Bosnia, Mlada Bosna, Dimitrije Mitrinović*

Introduction

Walt Whitman's reception in the Serbo-Croatian linguistic and cultural space started with the first translations published in 1900.¹ But even prior to this, occasional mentions in newspaper and magazine articles on various cultural topics and an essay by Milan Marjanović indicate that Whitman was a familiar name, at least in intellectual circles.² After these rather modest beginnings, Whitman's reception took off in the second decade of the twentieth century, and the poet became a continuing presence in the region that in 1919 would become the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). Most credit for the popularization of Whitman's work in the pre-World War I years goes to the members of the Young Bosnia movement. I use the word "movement" mainly to acknowledge that the people it gathered shared some political and cultural ideas,³ although Young Bosnia can hardly be described as an organized formation—it would be more accurate to describe it as a group of young intellectuals and high-school students active in various smaller secret societies across Bosnia and Herzegovina whose aim was to instigate sociopolitical and cultural changes. The name of the group became known worldwide after June 28, 1914, when its members organized and carried out the assassination of the Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo. This event laid emphasis on the group's political activism. Their activities were, however, far more variegated than that and comprised to a large extent a strife for the modernization of the regional cultural life and the national literature. The Young Bosnians wrote poetry and prose, literary and art criticism, edited magazines, and translated works of authors they found representative of modern thought. Their most prolific years were (not incidentally) the years of a great political turmoil in the Balkans, in particular the South Slavic regions under Turkish Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule. Like most other national movements and secret societies across the region, Young Bosnia emerged after the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Austria-Hungary in 1908, an event which caused major dissatisfaction among the local population, primarily the Serbs. It ceased to exist with the outbreak of the world war, when most of the people associated with the group were arrested and imprisoned while their leading organs, such as the magazine *Bosanska vila*, were banned.

As Predrag Palavestra has pointed out, focusing on the political activism of some members unjustly overshadows the Young Bosnians' important contribution to the

¹ Were translated "Song of the Broad-Axe" (excerpts), "Passage to India" (parts 8 and 9), and "Darest Thou Now O Soul"; the unsigned translations were published in the Croatian magazine *Stjelo*.

² In 1892, on the occasion of Whitman's death, a short note was published in the Croatian periodical *Narodne novine*. The same year, Serbian diplomat Čedomilj Mijatović briefly mentions the recently deceased poet in one of his articles. For more information on Milan Marjanović essay "W. Whitman" published in 1897, see Babić 12.

³ Marković points to three main strains in the Young Bosnia circle: "1) Serbian and Yugoslav (Serbo-Croat) nationalism; 2) revolutionary zeal to create socially more just societies, and 3) ideas on the ethical improvement of man." (Marković 103)

development and modernization of the cultural and intellectual life in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Palavestra 2010). In this respect, Young Bosnia was as much a literary as a political movement, advancing ideas of liberty and equality, but also aiming to introduce new poetic forms and devices from contemporary European literatures. The greatest concern of Young Bosnia authors was the “outmoded insular nationalism, conservative patriarchal dogmatism and primitive populism” in most of the Serbian and Croatian literature of the time; instead of these the Young Bosnians advocated “spiritual emancipation, European standards and the creation of a new intellectual climate on the premises of civic liberalism” (Palavestra 2010, 162). In their wish to modernize the national literature, they turned to literatures of other nations so that the translations of works by foreign authors appeared regularly in Bosnian periodicals and other publications. Among these authors, particularly esteemed were those whose work promoted ideas of freedom, brotherhood, and rejection of the old traditions, but also the representatives of the newest literary tendencies embodied in European expressionism.

The previous scholarly works on Whitman’s Serbo-Croatian reception mention very few of the prewar endeavors and do so without exploring the specific circumstances in which these translations appeared. Stephen Stepanchev only notes the translation published in 1912 in *Srpski književni glasnik* (*Serbian Literary Gazette*), erroneously proclaiming it the earliest and failing to mention the others from this period (See Stepanchev). Sonja Bašić corrects this mistake by referring to both the earliest, 1900 translation, which she does not consider particularly successful, and the later ones, rendered by “a group of translators who had in the period between 1909 and 1912 translated a considerable number of extracts from Whitman’s poems in the Bosnian review *Bosanska vila*” (Bašić 25). Bašić further notes that these translations master the rhythm of Whitman’s irregular lines much better than the 1900 ones; of the translators, she mentions three—Borivoj Jevtić, Ljubo Wiesner and Ivo Andrić—but without any remarks on their belonging to the Young Bosnia circle. A much more comprehensive account is provided by Ljiljana Babić, who notes that the first critic who wrote on Whitman in the Serbo-Croatian area was Milan Marjanović, and that the year his essay was published—1897—“coincides with the birth of modern literature in Croatia, whose representatives defended the idea of spiritual liberty in its struggle against any kind of oppression” (Babić 12). In her article, Babić meticulously lists and comments on (almost) all now known essays on Whitman and translations of his poems, briefly discussing the social circumstances of the time, the authors and the translators, as well as the publications—mostly periodicals—in which the translations appeared. As regards the translation activity in the particularly productive period of 1909–1913, Babić refers to it as “the first and more intensive discovery of Whitman” in the Yugoslav area, which “stimulated our young and revolutionary generation at the time.” (30) She further observes that the “rich translating activity of the writers of Young Bosnia, gathered around the journals *Bosanska vila*, *Gajret*, *Srpska omladina*, and *Zvono*, represents a unique testimony of the spiritual climate of Young Bosnia and of its significance for the cultural life of Bosnia and Herzegovina.” (31) Although Babić

primarily focuses on the semantic and metrical aspects of these translations, without delving into their place in the overall cultural development, her analysis is an invaluable basis for further research on this topic.

In this paper, I aim to point to the scope and significance of the Young Bosnians' work in promoting Whitman's poetry in the South Slavic regions in the context of the times and the general cultural activism of this group. In the span of five years, from 1909 to 1913, the number of translated Whitman's poems carried out by the members of the Young Bosnia circle surpasses the total number of Whitman Serbo-Croatian translations in the interwar period.⁴ Given that, aside from their political agenda, the Young Bosnians actively promoted the development of cultural and intellectual life as a form of resistance to the occupier, the paper also draws attention to the fact that the practice of translating Whitman not only reflects current literary and cultural trends in a region, but is also closely related to the struggle for independence and overall national development.

Translating Whitman

After the previously mentioned articles published around the turn of the century and the three 1900 translations, the Serbo-Croatian reception of Whitman's work came to a halt. The translating activity was resumed in 1909, with Zdenka Marjanović's translation of "As the Time Draws Nigh" published in Sarajevo, in the magazine *Bosanska vila* (*Bosnian Fairy*). All circumstances of Whitman's re-appearance at this particular time and place reflect the broader sociocultural context, that is the tense political situation in the region after the 1908 annexation. The event provoked a response from people engaged in cultural and literary activities, especially the editors and contributors of the literary magazine *Bosanska vila*, which launched a more active promotion of the idea of Yugoslavism, i.e. South Slavic unity. In this context, Z. Marjanović's choice of Whitman's poem presaging gloomy and cloudy days is indicative enough, but more than the theme of the poem itself, the translator was most likely drawn to the personality of the poet. Zdenka Marjanović remains a mysterious figure to this day, especially when compared to other Whitman translators from the same circle. She is, however, also known as the author of a contribution on Italian futurism (titled "Književna revolta u Italiji" ("A Literary Revolt in Italy")), which appeared two years later (in 1911), also in *Bosanska vila*. This article reveals Marjanović's keen interest in the newest avant-garde tendencies in Europe and her view of Whitman as a forerunner of futurism. Whitman is here depicted as "a great American poet and prophet," known throughout the Western world for "his hymns to modern industrialism, socialism, democratism, and energism," who disregarded "all existing scruples in poetic technique to the extent

⁴ Some instances of the Whitman reception in the interwar period can rightfully be considered a continuation of the Young Bosnian's prewar efforts. Some of the Young Bosnian authors (most notably Ivo Andrić) resumed translating and writing about Whitman after the war. More on the interwar reception in Yugoslavia in Aćamović 2021a.

that his ‘verses’ are poetry only because they are—poetry, and not because they are verses” (Marjanović 210).⁵ Marjanović links Whitman to the futurists on the grounds of his revolutionary poetic technique and his elimination of the “banal and conservative aesthetics,” also noting that “Marinetti’s school” approaches Whitman in its industrialism, dynamics and revolutionary spirit. The difference between them lies in that Whitman is “constructive: he creates a new order of things, while Marinetti and his people are utterly destructive: they only tear down, without building, getting intoxicated with the thunder of their words” (Marjanović 211).

Palavestra advances that Marjanović may have written this article at the explicit request of Dimitrije Mitrinović, arguing that it largely “corresponds to his literary ideas on the avant-garde poetry” (Palavestra 2003, 28–29). A philosopher, poet, art and literary critic, as well as a determined fighter for the intellectual re-birth of the South Slavic peoples and a proponent of the Yugoslav cultural and national unification,⁶ Mitrinović spent the prewar years studying in Zagreb, Belgrade, Munich and Tübingen, all the time maintaining close contacts with the Young Bosnia circle. This explains why he is now rightfully regarded as the ideologue of the group. It was owing to him that the Bosnian youth learnt about the most topical foreign authors of the time, particularly the German expressionists, Italian futurists, and Walt Whitman. Mitrinović was himself a frequent contributor to and even editor of *Bosanska vila* (from 1910 to 1913), so he could have been the one who instigated not only the publication of Marjanović’s article on futurism but her previous translation of Whitman as well.

A few months after Zdenka Marjanović’s essay on futurism, *Bosanska vila* published new translations of Whitman, thus opening the most productive period in this poet’s Serbo-Croatian reception through translation in the first half of the twentieth century. In the span of only three years—1911–1913—twenty-five translations were printed in magazines issued in Sarajevo, along with three others appearing in Belgrade magazines, also carried out by Bosnian translators. This is more than the total number of Serbo-Croatian interwar translations of Whitman (excluding the ones published within longer essays).

Bosanska vila, as the most prominent literary magazine in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the time (also read in Serbia and other South Slavic regions), had a key role in representing Whitman’s poetry as well as Whitman’s ideas to the local readership. Đuričković indicates that of all foreign poets translated in the magazine Whitman appeared most frequently, also noting that “[Whitman’s] cult of vital strength and

⁵ All translations from the cited works in Serbian (Serbo-Croatian) are provided by the author of the paper.

⁶ As Marković points out in his recent article on Dimitrije Mitrinović (in which this author also provides an informative overview of the historical and cultural context as well as of Mitrinović’s collaboration with Young Bosnia), the Bosnian philosopher was quite an all-round personality, difficult to capture within a particular category. His early work, before the First World War, was more nationally oriented, centered around the idea of Yugoslavism, while later on, especially after he moved to London, Mitrinović turned to more cosmopolitan matters, exploring the possibilities of universalism and the pan-human brotherhood. (Marković 2010)

resilience, cult of human solidarity in the common life struggles was a strong and important counterbalance to the flow of dark visions and pessimism” (Đuričković 439–440). From 1909 to 1913, translations of various poems or parts of longer ones appeared in eleven issues of the magazine, most of them during 1911 and 1912. Apart from Zdenka Marjanović, Whitman’s translators were Borivoje Jevtić (the most prolific of all), Ljubo Wiesner, Ivo Andrić and Mitra Moračina. Translated were (in order of appearance) the poems “As the Time Draws Nigh,” “Once I Pass’d Through a Populous City,” “The Wound-dresser” (part 4), “Whispers of Heavenly Death,” “I Sing the Body Electric” (part 8), “I Hear America Singing,” “Song of the Open Road” (part 1), “One’s Self I Sing,” “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd,” “Who Learns My Lesson Complete,” “On the Beach at Night Alone,” “To Think of Time” (parts 1, 8 and 9), as well as parts 26, 7, 6, 21, 2 and again 21 of “Song of Myself.”

Although the number of the poems translated is comparatively small considering Whitman’s rich oeuvre and although the choice seems to have been made rather randomly, without any plan or system, the translations thematically cover the most important aspects of Whitman’s poetics. The five parts of “Song of Myself” alone offer a fine insight into the breadth of Whitman’s thematic scope, displaying the poet’s rapture over the mystery of life and death, as well as his celebration of sensuality through different sights, sounds, olfactory or tactile sensations, while Whitman himself is introduced as the poet of the body and soul, heaven and hell, women and men. Through these excerpts, the readers could discover Whitman’s lyric persona, the “I” as an expression of the utmost subjectiveness, and the motif of the grass as a symbol of the continuity of life. The other translations add new topics and themes, presenting Whitman as the poet of lovers and caregivers, of the individual and the collective, of common workers and new, modern men, and finally as the poet of freedom. Through these translations, Whitman comes across as a poet whose musings on death and gloomy times or on the mysticism of clouds and stars are balanced with the sensuality of a naked human body taking pleasure in hugs and kisses. Therefore, despite the relatively small number of translated lines, the readers of *Bosanska vila* could form a rather clear picture of Walt Whitman as a poet, the diversity of the topics he covered, and the richness and unconventionality of his poetics. The readers could also glean some of the formal aspects of his poetry, his use of long catalogues and, most importantly, his free verse. Translating Whitman’s long unrhymed irregular lines seems to have been particularly challenging for the translators of the period, for all their affinity with modern poetic expression. Not all of them were faithful to the original formal features of the translated poems—Borivoje Jevtić, in his rendering of the section 21 of “Song of Myself,” combines two or three separate lines into longer ones, while Mitra Moračina, by not indenting new lines, converts the stanzas of “Who Learns My Lesson Complete” and “On the Beach at Night Alone” into prose paragraphs.

In the course of 1913, the translations of Whitman’s poems appeared in two other Sarajevo periodicals, *Gajret* [*Gayret*] and *Srpska omladina* [*Serbian Youth*]. *Gajret*, “a periodical for social affairs and public enlightenment,” was the organ of the

eponymous cultural association⁷ which promoted the education and cultural advancement of Bosnian Muslim high-school students. *Gajret* being of the similar cultural and political orientation as *Bosanska vila* (particularly in relation to Austro-Hungarian rule), the two magazines had collaborators from the same circles, some of whom were close to Young Bosnia. Such was Jovan Palavestra (*alias* Faik), who translated all of the six Whitman poems (or excerpts from poems) printed in *Gajret*—“Whispers of Heavenly Death,” “Poets to Come,” “To a Certain Cantratrice,” “To a Stranger,” “Song of the Open Road” (part 7), and “Song of Myself” (part 50). Again, the selection is quite diverse, and the translator clearly made a point not to repeat the poems already translated in *Bosanska vila*.

Three other Whitman translations appeared the same year in the March and April issues of *Srpska omladina*, rendered by an unsigned translator—“Ashes of Soldiers,” “Song of Myself” (part 48), and “Salut au Monde” (part 13). In the first of these issues, the translations are accompanied by a short note on the poet, emphasizing Whitman’s global popularity and referring to his poetic philosophy as “the natural philosophy of a man who feels bound to the earth and who gently and in equal manner loves the sun, air and hills, as well as the wide sprawling American streets, with their noises, songs, curses, cars roaring and trams creaking” (“O Ualtu Uitmen” 141). The note points to a connection between Whitman and the *vers-libristes* and futurists, also mentioning Verhaeren, Marinetti, and Arno Holz. The overall tone of the text (and the mention of these particular authors) suggests that it could have been written by someone close to Dimitrije Mitrović or by Mitrović himself. The orientation of the periodical indicates that the translator most likely belonged to the same circle as the other Whitman translators.

Although all the above mentioned translators were at least close to the Young Bosnia circle if not its prominent members, their translations display an individuality of approach. This can be seen already from the Serbo-Croatian transcriptions of the poet’s name.⁸ The name “Walt Whitman” appears transcribed as Ualt Uaitmen, Ualt Uitmen, Volt Uajtmen, Jalt Uitmen,⁹ and Valt Vitmen, while some translators retain the original English transcription. Apart from this, it seems that the translators did not use the same edition of Whitman’s poems as their source. Ljiljana Babić observes that in the prewar years, Whitman’s poetry was predominantly translated from its German translations (Babić 316). Generally speaking, this was a common practice when it comes to translating English literature, since publications in German were more readily available, owing to the geographic proximity of German and Austrian cities and university centers. In addition, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, German was taught at schools and therefore every high-school student could acquire some

⁷ The word “gajret” is of Arabic origin and means “effort; help.” See Kemura 30-31.

⁸ Foreign names in Serbian texts are transcribed phonetically. Croatian retains the original transcription. These magazines (*Bosanska vila* in particular) published texts in both Serbian and Croatian, advocating the idea of one language and one literature, Serbo-Croatian.

⁹ This was probably a typographical error since the same translator also uses the transcription “Ualt Uitmen” on the same page.

knowledge of it, whereas the number of intellectuals with a good command of English was still rather low, even in cities larger than Sarajevo. However, while most of the prewar translations of Whitman used German sources, there were exceptions to this rule. As indicated in notes at the bottom of the poems translated, Zdenka Marjanović, Mitra Moračina and Ivo Andrić translated Whitman from English, which implies they had English editions of Whitman's works at their disposal.

Whitman's *Élèves*—Dimitrije Mitrinović and Young Bosnia

The Young Bosnians' dedication to Whitman was in line with the overall cultural endeavors of their movement, aiming to modernize the local literary scene through the promotion of the latest tendencies in contemporary European literatures and the writers who were considered both modern in spirit and relevant to current domestic circumstances. Young Bosnia played a significant role in the intellectual and cultural life of the South-Slavic regions with its activists publishing not only translations, but also their own poetry and prose as well as articles discussing various sociopolitical and cultural issues. Not satisfied with the current state of affairs in their own national literature, they were persistently vying for the introduction of avant-garde poetics in the spirit of futurism and expressionism, which included free verse and other poetic devices which they believed would better express the feelings and ideas of the modern age. Apart from Whitman, the authors of Young Bosnia read, translated and wrote about Arno Holz, Émile Verhaeren, Maurice Maeterlinck, Henri Bergson, Pyotr Kropotkin, August Strindberg, and Knut Hamsun, among others, and thus could rightfully be considered "the pioneers of the advanced literary thought" in the region, paving the way for future generations of writers (Palavestra 1994, 91). The immediate result of their work was an increase in the general public's interest in precisely those authors and works they recommended, with the sales figures for some of these works rising after they received positive reviews by the Young Bosnians (See Palavestra 1994).

The intellectual and literary activities of Young Bosnia, however, were limited by the circumstances of life on the periphery of a grand empire, which implied having little immediate access to the products of European culture, and also by the fact that the members of that circle were very young, many of them still high-school students. Palavestra describes that generation as "susceptible to different influences and filled with unrefined opinions and moods," as well as affected by the psychology of the time, reading books "with no particular order or system," but always open to "anything that seemed grand and important and new" (Palavestra 1994, 11). Reading whatever they could lay their hands on and practically without any guidance from their elders, i.e. the poets and critics of the previous generation who favored conventional forms, the Young Bosnians formed their literary taste mostly intuitively but still managed to recognize the most progressive authors of the age.

Literature was the primary field of the Young Bosnians' activities, and it was through literature that they most immediately and systematically influenced "the awakening of the national consciousness and the rise of the disempowered masses,

steering the youth forces towards liberation actions, rebellion and revolt” (Palavestra 1994, 11). In the torrent of national sentiments and ambitions brought about by the prewar years, the Balkan wars and the ever more urgent need for the liberation from the Austro-Hungarian rule, the Young Bosnians encountered Walt Whitman, a poet of a relatively young and already powerful nation, whose ideas of democracy and egalitarianism, the common man equal not only to rulers but also gods, and the sacredness of the body and human sensuality brought to poetry the spirit of modernity. Whitman’s poetry supported two main ideals of the Young Bosnia movement: democratism, reflected in the request for the modernization of the society and emancipation of the masses, and Yugoslavism, as the brotherhood of the South-Slavic peoples, implying among other things the cultural unification and the unity of the Serbian and Croatian languages and literatures.

In the context of Young Bosnia’s literary and translation activities, particularly interesting are the ways in which the young translators and magazine contributors acquired works by foreign authors, Whitman included. There were two primary sources: libraries (school and public) and older students enrolled in foreign universities (such as Dimitrije Mitrinović), who regularly traveled to Vienna, Leipzig, or Munich, where they would pick up books and magazines as well as information on the latest cultural events in Europe. As German was a compulsory school subject across the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (including Bosnia and Herzegovina), they had no difficulty reading the editions of German or Austrian publishers, which were sold at affordable prices, and thus popular among students. These new books, offering an insight into faraway and almost mystical worlds, were passed from hand to hand, read and re-read, discussed and then translated, and all this happened in a circle comprised of mostly young people.¹⁰ As Borivoje Jevtić remembers, they would gather at his home and spend long hours talking about different topics, political, revolutionary, but also literary, and of the latest literary and artistic tendencies they learned about from Dimitrije Mitrinović. It was owing to Mitrinović that they “felt the pleasure of incessant reading, translated Whitman’s ‘Leaves of Grass,’ leafed through Benzmann’s ‘Anthology of Modern German Lyric,’ passed remarks on the mildey air of Wilde’s ‘Ballad of Reading Gaol,’ dealt with the French, German, and English classics, great poets and marvelous fiction writers and playwrights” (Jevtić 24–25). Ivo Andrić also testifies that, urged by Mitrinović, “the young poets started to translate Walt Whitman, discuss free verse and expand their literary horizons, bringing an exceptional vivacity and freshness to the cultural life of Sarajevo” (Palavestra 2003, 29). Considering these circumstances, we can say that although each translation was signed under a specific name, reading and translating Whitman in Sarajevo in the years prior to 1914 was a joint effort of the Young Bosnia circle.

This joint effort, however, would never have been so productive had it not been for Dimitrije Mitrinović, who introduced Walt Whitman to his young compatriots.

¹⁰ Borivoje Jevtić published his first translations of Whitman at 17 and Ivo Andrić and Jovan Palavestra at 20 years of age.

To Mitrinović, Whitman was one of the great figures of the modern age, a poet who encouraged the renewal of the entire German literature previously “languishing in the watery sentimentality of romanticist epigones” (Mitrinović 188). As a great admirer of contemporary German poetry, Mitrinović could hardly have put Whitman on a higher pedestal. Mitrinović discerns a decisive impact of Whitman’s poetics on the poetry of Arno Holz, primarily concerning its features of form, rhythm and versification, which, freed of traditional constraints, brought forth a personal and modern expression. In his essay “Iz lirike Germanije” (“From Germany’s Lyric Poetry”), Mitrinović emphasizes that Holz is “a German sovereign of free verse, which was already in a successful, powerful and triumphal manner used by the great American poet of progress and democracy, Walt Whitman” (Mitrinović 192). That Whitman’s contribution surpasses strictly formal aspects and stretches to the considerations of man and society in general is emphasized in Mitrinović’s observations on the poetry of Richard Dehmel. Mitrinović asserts that Dehmel “surrendered himself to the forceful and fruitful influence of Whitman’s dynamic moral ideology, especially with regard to Whitman’s understanding of the sublimity of human physiological life;” Dehmel thus gained “that humane breadth of feelings and that nobility in the understanding of eroticism, as well as that aversion to the weakness and wateriness of the sentimentalists” (Mitrinović 195).

Mitrinović longed to see the features he most valued in German poetry applied in Serbian, as well, believing that Serbian literature needed modernization and opening up to foreign influences. In his essay “Nacionalno tlo i modernost” (“National Soil and Modernity”), while deliberating on the possibilities of creating an authentic national literature, Mitrinović points out that such an endeavor should not be founded on the tradition of one’s own nation only and that the national does not exclude the modern. He asserts that “there exists an opinion that the modernization of our society and our literature is a defeat of our nation, our individuality and our national ideals, and this opinion is wrong” (Mitrinović 158). Contrary to this, the philosopher believes that Serbian literature can accommodate a big impact from Western literatures and still remain authentic, while a literary work of specific national distinctions can simultaneously be modernist (159). This line of reasoning indicates why Whitman struck a chord with Mitrinović, as the American poet exemplified not only the modern in literature but also the struggle for an authentic national literature.¹¹

What Mitrinović preached in his essays he and some of the Young Bosnians practiced in their own poetry, written in an attempt to follow the latest avant-garde tendencies. While a detailed analysis of Whitman’s impact on the work of these poets would demand a separate study, let me point to the most distinctive features. One

¹¹ When it comes to Mitrinović, my focus was primarily his work related to Young Bosnia, i.e. the texts he wrote before the First World War and published in Bosnia. Considering that after the war Mitrinović turned to theosophy and mysticism and especially to developing ideas of the universal brotherhood, which could easily be compared to some of Whitman’s own, it would be interesting to investigate if the Bosnian philosopher continued to read Whitman in his British years as well.

of them is free verse, which was readily adopted as a poetic form adequate for the new century and used in place of more classical forms, like the sonnet. After the initial poetic endeavors following accepted conventions, the poets of the Young Bosnia circle began writing poetry in free verse, unrhymed poetry or poetry in prose.¹² Their poetic experiments were encouraged by the theoretical discussions led on this topic, some of which were published on the pages of *Bosanska vila*. In the years when Whitman's translations appeared at regular intervals, the magazine published three important essays by an eminent Serbian poet and critic, Svetislav Stefanović¹³—"Stih ili pesma?" ("A Verse or a Poem?"), "Više slobode stiha!" ("More Freedom of the Verse!"), and "Ritam i emocija" ("Rhythm and Emotion"). In these essays, Stefanović also refers to Whitman as one of the most important poets of free verse.¹⁴ While most of the free-verse poetry written by the Young Bosnian authors was of little literary value, their attempts at this form point to the impact Whitman's work had on their creative imagination.

As Palavestra observes, for this generation of the (Young) Bosnian authors, free verse was more than a poetic form—they embraced it enthusiastically, ready to accept "any literary program which, in the name of the energy of the new age, new rhythms of life and new relations within society [...], enabled a more immediate expression of the internal experiences, urges and strivings of this young and subversive generation" (Palavestra 1994, 232). Free verse was a manifestation of a deeper urge for liberation on the social, cultural, and quite intimate levels. Whitman's emphasis on the body and sensuality is another thing that resonated among his Bosnian admirers. Mitrinović's poem "Požar ploti" ("The Fire of Passion") is exemplary in this respect, with its eroticism and passionate outbreaks, which at the time of the poem's publication (1911) were also "a challenge to the ruling social moral and a brazen, reckless, unstoppable demand for freedom, a proof of sensuality and complete identification with one's own essence" (Palavestra 2003, 222). The irregular, unrhymed lines punctuated by the repetition of key words [*ženo* ("woman"), and *hoću* ("I want")], which provide the rhythm of the poem, convey a truly Whitmanesque ecstasy of the sexual act and the poet's physical and spiritual merging with another being. Liberation of both form and thematic content was what the Young Bosnians recognized as necessary for the modernization of the intellectual and cultural life of their communities, and in this, they represent the forerunners of the avant-garde movements that marked the development of Serbian literature in the 1920s.

¹² Ivo Andrić's first published poem, written in the form of lyric prose, appeared in 1911 in *Bosanska vila*, sharing the page with Borivoje Jevtić's translations of three Whitman poems.

¹³ Stefanović was also known as a skillful translator of English and American authors. His translations of Whitman appeared after the war (see Aćamović 2021b).

¹⁴ See Stefanović 1912, 186.

Conclusion

Although primarily driven by the political ideas of national liberation and South Slavic unification, the Young Bosnia movement also had a cultural agenda, which for the most part concerned the reformation and modernization of national literature. In this context, the introduction of foreign authors through the translation of their works was central to the organization's activities, and Walt Whitman was among the favorites. This is confirmed by the number of poems translated (an uncommonly large number considering the circumstances), which appeared in Sarajevo magazines, along with other articles on topical cultural and literary issues. As a poet whose work suggested modernity in form and content, Whitman was read and translated by those who wished to modernize their national literature. In the prewar years, as the Young Bosnians gathered to discuss politics and literature, reading and translating Whitman was a collective activity, instigated by Dimitrije Mitrinović, who himself was an important proponent and practitioner of Whitman's ideas. Their work laid a foundation for the future reception of the American poet in Serbo-Croatian literatures, but also for the further development of poetic innovations which Whitman foreshadowed in his poetry.

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